

TESTIMONY OF

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BEFORE THE

GOVERNMENT REFORM COMMITTEE
FIELD HEARING ON GANG ACTIVITY
IN MONTGOMERY AND PRINCE GEORGE'S
COUNTIES

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TAKOMA PARK CITY COUNCIL CHAMBERS

Thank you for this invitation to participate in this field hearing on gang activity in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties. I am the Program Director of Identity, a nonprofit organization that is the lead agency at the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center in Takoma Park. I also want to thank those of you who are here who have worked to make the Center a reality for a generation of young people who are deserving of opportunities in their lives.

I would like to provide you with some information regarding the characteristics of the population we are serving at the Center as well as a summary of the work that has been realized to date.

Examples from actual incidents in the lives of our clients will hopefully illustrate for you the emotional and psychological situations confronted by many of these young people.

Imagine the pain that a young 13 year old girl must be feeling who decides to get "jumped into" a gang, knowing full well that she will be used sexually by the male members of that gang. This young girl finds herself in an abandoned room, engaging in sexual relations with between 10 and 15 boys or young men, each waiting his turn to release his own painful memories or experiences within her

body. What does this young girl feel? - Desperation, guilt, humiliation, defenseless, wishing for death, fear. I always ask myself, “What was the extent of her pain before this to have led her to make this decision?”

I have no doubt that upon hearing what was done to her, most of us here, and myself included, feel the impulse to hunt down the perverse animals that would commit such a terrible act to this young girl. Nothing justifies their actions and they should pay for their crime. But our challenge as service providers and policy makers is to control our anger and our rush to punish, and to try to look beyond the act to the history and experiences of those boys and young men. Only by understanding what brings a young person to this point in his life will we be able to effectively work in prevention or intervention.

One young boy was just six years old when his parents abandoned him in his home country. They fled a country that had been torn apart by civil war and had left them in abject poverty. His caretakers were his grandmother, who nurtured him and showed him love and an abusive, alcoholic and violent uncle who only showed him the end of his braided cow whip regularly as he struck the young boy across his back and legs. The grandmother could do very little to protect her grandson.

During those two years no one heard his cries, cries so similar to those of the young girl in the abandoned room that he is now violating. So at eight years of age he escaped from that house and in the streets he found himself a new family. They provided shelter, food, clothing, and, most importantly, they told him over and over that they would protect him. He became part of that group of “lost children with nothing to lose.” He was initiated into a criminal street gang and he was protected..

Seven years later, now 15 years old and tired of so much violence all around him, he finally decided to do something different with his life. He made the courageous decision to leave the gang life the only way he could – by coming to the United States in search of his family and a refuge.

He found his family here, but it was a changed family. He hardly knew his parents and they had little time for him. Their multiple jobs kept them busy and away from the home. His step-siblings had taken his place in the family and they barely spoke Spanish and resented his arrival. The community he found himself in seemed to know nothing of the hardship, suffering, poverty and violence from which he had come. And no one ever asked about it.

That same longing for a family that drove him into the streets at the age of eight, drove him there again. Within a year of his arrival, his dream of starting a new life came to an end. Thirteen minutes of a beating – punches, kicks - and once again he was jumped into a street gang. Some time later he found himself in that abandoned room, waiting his turn with the 13 year old girl and wondering what had happened to his dream of a new life.

The perpetrators of crimes can be seen as victims, depending on the point at which you begin to relate the history of their lives. Young people with histories such as these, and many that are even more complex, arrive at the Center each day. They reflect diverse racial and ethnic groups. They are both the perpetrators of crimes and the victims of crimes, depending on the point in their personal stories that they are sharing with you.

The Youth Opportunity Center reflects the joint efforts of Montgomery and Prince George's Counties, the federal government and Identity's Center partners – The YMCA of Silver Spring, the Office of the Public Defender, Pride Youth Services and the Montgomery County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. The complexity of the cases that are seen in the Center and the issue of gang violence in general, can only be dealt with in this fashion, setting aside the jurisdictional

differences that only serve as a distraction from the work that needs to be done and pooling multiple resources and expertise to address the myriad issues that arise in each case.

The Center only became operational in May of this year. It is open six days per week. Weekdays it is operational from noon until 9:00pm. During these first four months, the Center served 119 clients, youth and their family members who are impacted by gangs and gang violence. These clients received 169 documented services that included case management, educational support, youth development and social skills-building, mental health, legal services, job training and placement and tattoo removal. A Youth Advisory Board and a Community Advisory Board meet regularly.

We have also established an excellent working relationship with Warden Green and his staff at the Clarksburg Correctional Facility. We are working together to provide youth who are to be released from that facility with early support, to help keep them from returning to a criminal or gang lifestyle and to make the Center a place they will be drawn to upon their release.

But while we see these 119 clients as an example of early success, there remains much more to be done. During the same four month period, we received more than 80 additional calls from parents, youth, teachers and others, wanting to refer young people for services. Despite repeated follow-up calls, those youth have still not accessed the Center's services. Those calls are evidence that our community already sees the Center as a valuable resource. But those are the young people we still need to reach.

In closing, I want to thank Congressman Chris Van Hollen for his leadership in the area of gang prevention and intervention, and his support for the creation of the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center.